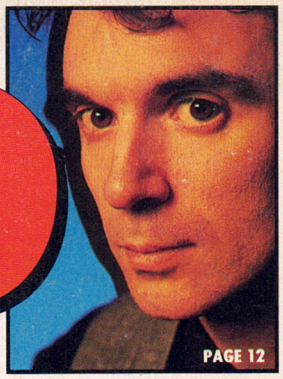
DAVID BYRNE : THE RECORD INTERVIEW

RECORD



PAGE 12

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HALL & OATES MOVING ON

CONSUMER GUIDE TO ROCK VIDEO

THE FIRM

THE BLASTERS

JASON & THE SCORCHERS

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RECORD

JUNE 1985 VOL. 4 NO. 8

ROCK ON 6

The Firm's U.S. tour got underway in Dallas and our reporter was there to witness a fairly dull beginning; he went back for a second time, though, when the tour returned to Texas, and found that a few things had changed. But for better or worse? . . . in the midst of his mammoth U.S. tour, **Prince** is also preparing for his second film role; **Billy Joel**'s trying to get into pictures too, reportedly negotiating a deal that would allow him to direct as well as star; and the first pics are out of **Tina Turner**'s movie de-

DAVID KING

11

but in *Road Warrior* and she looks mah-velous . . . on the home front, **Pat Benatar**'s a mommy now, and **Keith Richards** is a daddy . . . **Sheena Easton** may be singing that naughty Prince song, but she says her image hasn't changed . . . **Simple Minds** are planning an extended assault on these shores in '85 . . . **Jenny Burton** learns a new discipline and it pays off on her new record.

THE RECORD INTERVIEW

DAVID BYRNE

By Anthony DeCurtis . 12

More than a talking head, David Byrne continues to venture into unusual realms of American music, this time with the release of an album of recordings intended as a score for experimental playwright Robert Wilson's *Knee Plays*. Associate editor Anthony DeCurtis, author of our February '84 cover story on Byrne, catches up with the chief Head again to discuss this latest venture and to get the hot skinny on the next Talking Heads project.

THE BLASTERS' HARD LINE

By Gary Burch 18

An All-American band looks for a breakthrough.

HALL AND OATES: PHASES IN STAGES

By Anthony DeCurtis . 22

In the wake of their monumental success of late, Hall and Oates are contemplating new solo projects and new directions for their brand of double dynamite. Says Daryl Hall: "Breaking the rules is the best thing we could do now."

THE FERVOR OF RURAL MYSTICS

By Christopher Hill . . . 30

Stardom flared fitfully over Jason and the Scorchers' horizon in 1984, and now these Nashville cats have consolidated their strengths on an exciting new album, *Lost and Found*. Contributing editor Christopher Hill sat in on some of the sessions and filed this report on a band that has a firm grasp on its mission.

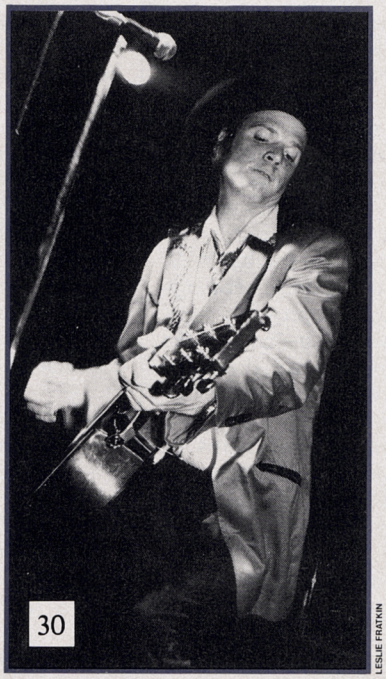
MUSIC VIDEO

CONSUMER GUIDE TO ROCK VIDEO 35

Rounding up the latest releases in music video for the home.

ELECTRONICS

AUDIO 40
HANDS ON 42
MUSICAL ELECTRONICS . . 43



30

LESLIE FRATKIN

DEPARTMENTS

LETTERS 4
CHARTS 44
WHAT'S NEW 46
RECORDS 48
CLASSIFIEDS 54

COVER PHOTO BY ANDY FREEBERG
TOP INSET BY STEVEN MARK NEEDHAM

18

MARILYN SCHATZBERG

TAPE TALK

WE AT DENON AMERICA noted with great interest the results of your premium high bias tape comparison in the March '85 issue of RECORD ("Chrome Wars: Tale of the Tapes"). I would like to state that the method and results of your comparison were fair and accurate. But wait! Why should a company whose product, DX-7, placed *last* be pleased with the results? Well, DX-7 is our *budget-priced high bias tape.* Our premium tape, DX-8, was not included in the comparison. In fact, the difference between our budget formulation, DX-7, and the premium formulations of TDK, Maxell, and others was so close that you stated that DX-7 "actually sounded better than our third and fourth place winners when no noise reduction was used."

DX-7 is a dual-coated, high density cobalt-doped ferric oxide tape, designed to perform optimally in high level recording situations (approaching saturation), much like those needed to make superior sounding tapes for the car with lots of punch, or tapes for the home with extremely low background noise.

But in 1983, Denon introduced its premium high bias tape, DX-8, which offers 80 db of dynamic range (lkz). DX-8, which is actually a metal/cobalt-ferric hybrid, is the tape which *should* have been compared to our competitors. DX-8's performance exceeds that of DX-7 in sensitivity, coercivity, retentivity, MOL, and SOL. DX-8's extremely wide frequency response and dynamic range characteristics make it ideal for recording from the most demanding sources such as digital LPs, Compact Discs and live performances.

So, the results of the March issue tape test were accurate, but something of a mismatch; their heavyweights versus our light-heavyweight. Even so, Denon DX-7 hung in there. We believe, however, that our top contender, DX-8, could take the crown.

We look forward to the rematch.

STEPHEN BAKER
National Tape Sales Manager
Denon America, Inc.
Fairfield, NJ

Denon's high-bias DX-8 gets its proper test in this month's Audio column.—Ed.

VOX POPULI?

BONO DISGRACES HIMself with the observation that the critics who hated the songwriting on *The Unforgettable Fire* must be just mean, awful ol' cynics ("The Fire Within," March RECORD). "Can I be one day Batman and the next the Joker?" he coyly asks. Exactly, damn it! Bono simply doesn't know the difference between sublime lyrics and sappy ones, and that's the worm at the heart of my admiration for U2. I can only conclude that Batman wrote "New Year's Day," the lament of a heart that knows it exists to be broken as surely as one year follows another.

Take "A Sort of Homecoming," for example. It's full of driving snow, fields of mourning, dream landscapes, and bomb-blast lightning waltzes, but the verbiage adds up to zero. When something "passes" water, Bono, what is it doing? Yep. I imagine that cloud peeing all over poor Martin Luther King's grave, and I blush for every time I grabbed a friend's sleeve and said, "Hey, you've got to listen to a song by this group from Ireland . . ."

Bono's Stanley Kubrick-like plea for the audience to be patient with his obscure work of art until they "find" the meanings doesn't hold up either. Listeners remember only too well that U2 worked out the meanings before they committed the songs to vinyl on *War.* I guess the official word from us cynics to the lyricist we still root for is "Cut out the justification and get back to work—we know you can do much better!"

Positive enough for you, Mr. Hewson?

EMILY FLUM
Athens, OH

PRIMADONNA

LIKE A GREAT MANY OF today's rock 'n' roll flash-in-the-pans, Madonna ("Maybe She's Good," March RECORD) works as much, if not more so, as an easy image for the public to latch onto. Of course, as she says, it's the music between the grooves that's the most important aspect of her career. But does anyone honestly believe that's all she's selling to the public? It simply isn't enough to let the music speak for itself anymore, as I'm sure she's aware. Marketing strategy calls the shots, and given that fact that she's an aggressively ambitious young woman, I doubt Madonna has any qualms about exploiting herself as a sexy tart if that's what it takes to become a mega-star.

In this age of rock video, it's getting increasingly difficult to distinguish between what's real and what's image only. The business of selling the artist has almost taken precedence over the source of the interest in the first place: the tunes.

GARY KIMBER
Downsview, Ont., Canada

Last year when I purchased Madonna's first album, I was very impressed with this new artist's talent. But the fact that she is a talented musician is being overlooked because people are only listening to her lyrics and portraying her as a sleaze and a bad influence on today's young generation. Madonna identifies with today's young generation; she's someone young girls look up to. Madonna has created a new fashion trend, recorded two great albums, and made a celebrity of herself—she's going somewhere.

CYNTHIA FLETCHER
Pittsburgh, PA

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Catching Up with DAVID BYRNE

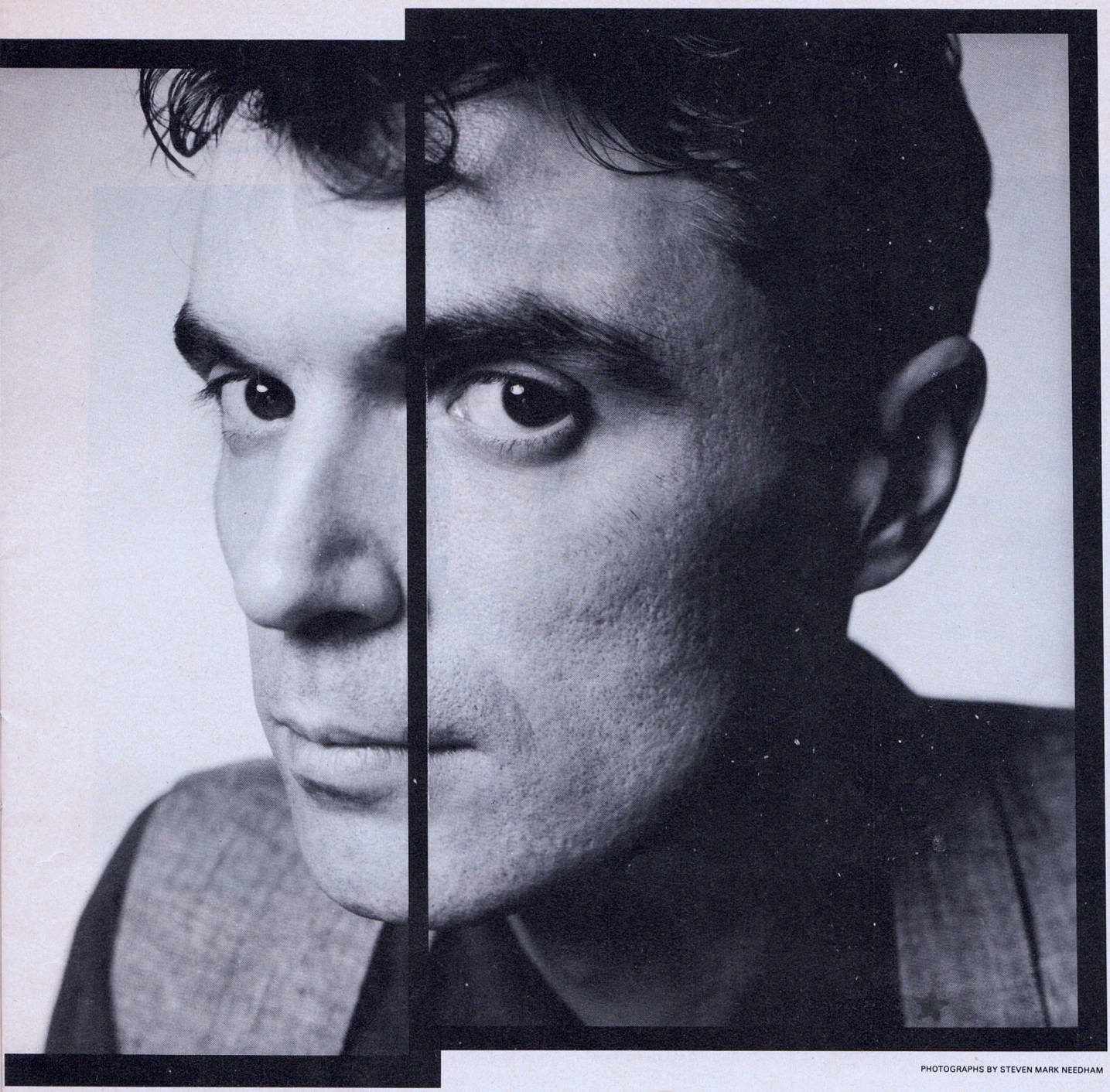
By Anthony DeCurtis

TALKING HEADS' MAIN MAN David Byrne never lets success slow him down. Hot off back-to-back gold records for the Heads' *Speaking in Tongues* and the *Stop Making Sense* soundtrack, he's just released a solo disk, *The Knee Plays*, consisting of pieces he wrote for playwright Robert Wilson's massive performance art extravaganza, *the CIVIL WarS.* Musically, Byrne takes a turn here, simultaneously moving away from the ecstatic funk of recent Talking Heads outings; the primitive rhythm-charged experimentalism of his Brian Eno collaboration, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*; and the spare, spacy excursions of his songs for choreographer Twyla Tharp's *The Catherine Wheel.*

On *The Knee Plays*, Byrne returns to some characteristic themes (food-shopping, clothing and personality, identity mergers) in spoken narrations over resonant brass arrangements inspired by indigenous New Orleans music. At his record company's offices in New York, Byrne spoke expansively about his new musical direction, the making of *Stop Making Sense*, his new film script, where the Heads are heading, and, um, UFOs. As you'll see, weird as he is, Byrne hasn't yet stopped making sense.

The Knee Plays is such a significant departure for you. How did you get interested in working with New Orleans brass music?

It was in a roundabout way inspired by this band I saw in New Orleans years ago—the Dirty Dozen Brass Band. They're a brass band of pretty conventional instrumentation, but they have arrangements that are more contemporary-sounding than the older bands that might play in the Dixieland or traditional jazz styles. They'll do, like, a Thelonious Monk song, but arranged for a marching band. And then they'll do a little bit of "Beat It" and segue into the theme from *Wild Wild West.*



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN MARK NEEDHAM

Since then, Robert Wilson approached me about working with him as part of his epic opera, or performance piece or theater piece, *the CIVIL WarS.* He originally approached me about doing music for a few different sections, but due to time limitations I could only do one section. I chose *The Knee Plays.* He calls them that because they function as joints between the larger scenes. Each one is about five minutes long and is performed in front of a backdrop while the big sets and stage elements are being changed from one of the huge scenes to another.

When he approached me, as is his way of working, there was no text, no dialogue and a very simple kind of story. Most of all there was just a series of little drawings, almost like illustrations for a fairy tale.

When you say a story, did he outline for you what he felt should be happening?

I did music that's going in one direction and the story's going in another direction. And the stage pictures, the staging, is telling another story again.

Having seen some of his theater pieces before, there's a sense that there's a number of things going on simultaneously which in a literal sense don't have anything to do with one another. In another sense, they might. Or they're at least presented together, and they're sometimes organized in a way that they relate to one another, although they're telling separate stories at the same time, or telling a story and doing a dance at the same time. The dance may say one thing and the story might say something else.

Was *the CIVIL WarS* initially commissioned for the Olympics?

Yeah, (*The Knee Plays)* was just one small part of it. The total thing would have lasted at least eight hours. That's a pretty conservative estimate. The scale of the other scenes and acts is pretty massive and pretty involved. It involves a variety of things

'Most modern ideas that are really good are generally a reaffirmation of an eternal feeling that had been submerged for awhile'

picked from different portions of the arts. In one section there were very well-known opera singers. In another section, a pretty well-known European playwright was doing the text. Then there were film projections, people flying through the air, all sorts of things going on in different sections. Sometimes the sets are just huge, just humongous. They're on the scale of grand opera.

And it wasn't staged because of its scale. Was there any response from the Olympics Committee about that? Were they disappointed?

Some people were disappointed, other people felt that they were totally unfamiliar with that kind of work. Los Angeles is a city that doesn't have a tradition of theater, it has a tradition of film. So there isn't a tradition that theater can be a powerful medium. And it was during a period when there was a whole arts festival for the Olympics, so there were an awful lot of other things going on as well. So the loss of one, even though it was probably the biggest one of all, wasn't missed as much as it might have been.

In terms of the music you decided to work with for *The Knee Plays*, did you feel that you wanted to make a departure from the things you had been doing? Did you feel you had gone about as far as you wanted to go with funk?

Pretty much. I felt I could keep doing it and still enjoy it, but if I kept doing it I'd turn into a parody of myself or be too completely identified with one thing. My interests are more well-rounded than that. I knew I wanted to do something else with theater or dance. For *The Catherine Wheel,* I did a tape. I thought this time I'd really like to do it with live musicians.

Were you getting this together at the same time you were working on *Stop Making Sense*?

The music was composed while the sound was being mixed for *Stop Making Sense*, at least a lot of the music was. The sound was being mixed in the daytime, and at night I'd come home and write. The final rehearsals were in April, May (of 1984). At that point, *Stop Making Sense* was done.

Do you have any difficulty making those kinds of shifts?

No, no, because I know in my own life I don't see it as a contradiction if I put on a pop record and right after it listen to something completely different.

You've been living in New York for a long time, but often your songs are set in a world of shopping malls, parking lots, cars, supermarkets. Is there any reason why you keep returning to that type of environment, even though it's removed from your day-to-day experience?

It is a little bit (removed), but somehow that's my impression of America. When I think about the country I live in, that's what I think about. I don't think about New York City. So that's what I write

about, and I assume that's the environment most people live in, too.

Up to a point, it's a challenge. I almost feel obliged to write about the way I live and the way a lot of other people live, rather than writing about fantastic things, about heroic love affairs, or monsters and demons. Although I think those are valid things too, in a sense.

But ordinary daily living is ignored a lot, so it's my job to stand up and say *(rises from his seat and raises a clenched fist)*, 'Wait a minute! I'm not gonna shirk that responsibility!'

Now you say the way you live and the way other people live, but a lot of times there's a real dispassionate quality in your presentation of those activities. It's almost as if you're looking at our culture the way an anthropologist or an alien would. Where does that distance come in?

I don't feel that way most of the time. I feel like I fit in pretty well. I mean *(begins grinning wildly)*, when I go to a 7-11, I don't feel like, '*Wait* a minute! What is *that?* What *is* that? What . . . is . . . that . . . for? How . . . do . . . you . . . eat . . . this?' I don't quite feel like *that*.

But at the same time, it's interesting to almost adopt that kind of approach. And then all of a sudden you look at these things that you deal with every day the way a foreigner would, or the way someone would who's seeing it for the first time. It makes you see it in a fresh way.

The other reason is, to go along with the history of Bob Wilson's theater . . . quite a lot of recent theater has taken this kind of approach of presenting things in a rather detached way. In a sense the assumption is that the emotional input is left up to the audience. Listeners read their own emotions into it or their own meaning into it and apply it to their own lives. So it's assumed that it's inappropriate for the performer to dictate to the audience what the meaning is of a certain word or what the emotional content is of a certain word or phrase, that that's telling the audience what to think or how to feel. So as much as possible, you try to remove that and let the audience think or feel for themselves.

And so I even extended that to the music (for *The Knee Plays)*, where although it would be easy to make this kind of music swing and be real bouncy, mix the drums up more and make it almost like a dance band, a lot of the emotional content has been flattened out, so the relationships among the different parts are more or less just presented without the other stuff.

And yet sometimes when I listen I still find the melodies moving, but in a sense I'm reading my own emotions into it, instead of the players putting theirs in. There's arguments for and against all that, but that's why the record is the way it is.

In "In the Future" you make a series of statements, many of which are contradictory, with the final statement being, "In the future there will be so much going on, no one will be able to keep track of it." Do you see that as a certain kind of reality that the art you create has to reflect?

I suppose it is some sort of response to media glut or something like that, but I think that kind of presentational theater is a way of offering things just for people to look at or listen to, without trying to justify their existence. In the sense that a person doesn't have to justify their existence; they were born and there's nothing much they can do about it! Or a tree, you look at it and there might be some reason why it's there, but it doesn't have to have a meaning.

A lot of this kind of performance is presented, I think, simply to say, 'This is something and here it is.' It might mean something, but more than anything else it *exists* and it's just placed before you.

While the *attitude* is to present things, there is a conscious or unconscious choice of *what* to present. And that *is* probably a response to the contemporary world, but it's hard for me to put my finger on what the reason is for each thing.

In the past, the solo projects that you've worked on have really had an impact on Talking Heads. Is that happening again?

In a very roundabout way this time. On the Talking Heads record we're doing right now, we've used a lot more acoustic instruments. Of course, *(The Knee Plays)* is entirely acoustic. But I don't think the material would remind you of this at all.

Are you producing it yourselves?

Yes.

Was everybody pretty much in agreement about the direction they wanted the band to move in with the upcoming album?

I think so, I think so. We didn't have any big disagreements about the direction any of the songs should go in. Any disagreements we had were pretty small ones.

What made you decide to make *Stop Making Sense*?

I was real happy with the way things seemed to come together in that tour. The visual elements in the staging, the costumes and the music, it seemed to be a culmination of sorts. If not musically, then combining the music with the staging. And it went over really well with audiences. I thought, there's proof that it's successful, it's worth preserving or documenting so that more people can see it. Plus it frees me from having to duplicate any of that.

Many concert movies are bad, even when the concert was good. Was there any concern on your part about the difficulties of putting a concert over on film?

A little bit, not all that much, I guess because I'd had some experience editing videotapes and working with things myself that I didn't feel like I was completely handing over what we'd done to someone else. I still felt like I could be involved in it, have some input into it.

I'm real proud of it, and I think everybody who worked on it was, but at the same time the concert film genre is kind of frowned on and people don't have very high expectations of that genre. So there was a big chance that people would just stay away in droves because they'd been turned off by previous concert things.

Will there be a Talking Heads tour this year?

No, no, not at all. It's time to reassess what a performance with music should do, or could do, or can do. That takes awhile. If you just go out and tour, then you never take time to think or feel what you'd really like to feel out there.

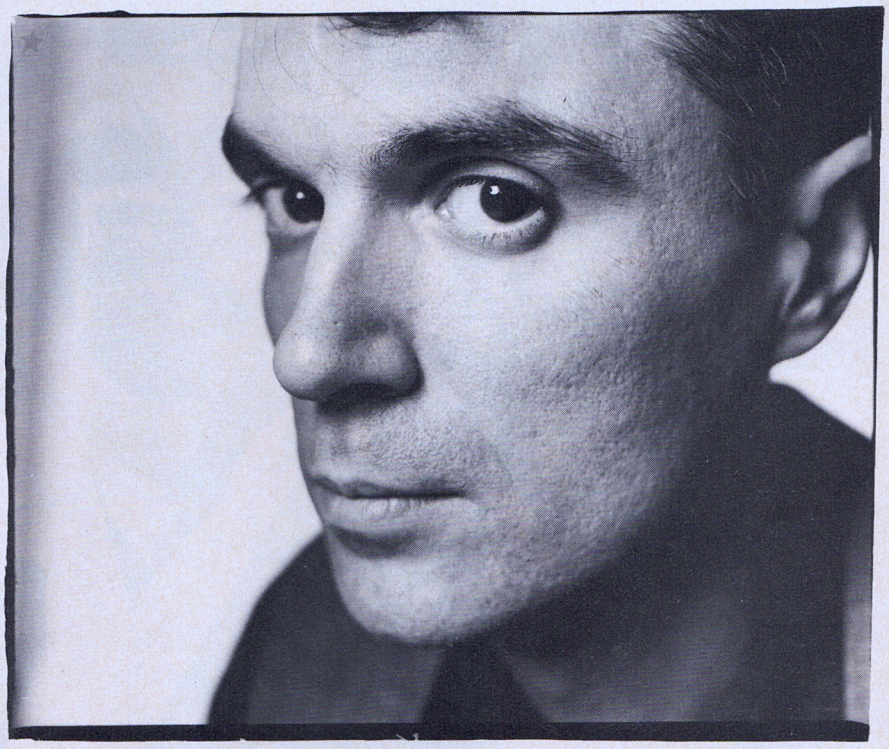
I understand you recently completed a movie script.

I worked with some other writers and wrote a script with songs for a movie project. It's kind of an impressionistic portrait of a town and a few people in the town. It's set in Texas.

Is *True Stories* the working title?

Yeah, because a lot of the characters and events are based on real things.

'I feel obliged to write about the way I live and the way a lot of other people live, rather than writing about heroic love affairs, or monsters and demons'



Isn't it partially based on stories from the *National Enquirer*?

Yeah, some of the characters and situations came from there.

Do you often read the National Enquirer?

Occasionally. A little bit that one, and a lot *The World Weekly News* (*ed.: He means* The Weekly World News), which is even more spectacular. That's the one that prints about "UFOs Visit Your Husband"! At the time I was most interested in the human interest stories. For instance, they'd have a story about a husband and wife who considered themselves happily married but they hadn't spoken with each other for about thirty years!

I believe that this family exists, that that's true, that it's not made up. Just as I think that somebody might believe that they took a trip on a UFO. I don't know that it happened, but they might really *believe* it did. I don't think all the time it's just a bunch of cynics at typewriters making up that stuff and getting a big laugh out of it. *(Laughs to himself)* A pretty benevolent way of looking at *The World Weekly News*!

You're seen as a real modern guy, but there's a continuing fascination in your work with things that are extremely traditional in one way or another. Is that a dichotomy you feel in yourself?

No, I think the most modern ideas or modern notions that are really good are generally some kind of reaffirmation of some eternal or universal or traditional feeling that had been kind of submerged for a while. And so when it really clicks is when something eternal is rephrased in modern terms and made to live again and have some kind of relevance to contemporary life.

Do you see yourself as a spiritual person, then?

I can accept that as being an important realm in people's living, an important aspect of people's lives. Something that's non-material and doesn't have to do in a really direct way with ordinary notions, that goes beyond that. I can accept that that exists. ○